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# **Mediating Factors in the Provision of Lecturers' Written Feedback to Postgraduate Taught Students**

## **Abstract**

This paper reports on research that investigated the factors mediating written feedback provision by lecturers teaching on three postgraduate taught programmes at a university in the UK. The study adopted a case study approach, with the postgraduate programmes as the cases. Lecturers participated in background and stimulated recall interviews, with their authentic written feedback used as the stimulus. The study identified multiple mediating factors that impacted on the staff members' feedback processes. These could be separated into three main categories: experiential, social and environmental. The mediators indicated that written feedback in higher education may serve multiple simultaneous goals that relate not only to student learning but also to lecturers' perceptions of their roles and function within the broader institutional context.

Keywords: written feedback; teacher feedback; university lecturers; feedback mediators

## **1. Background**

When compared to research on the student perspective, the experience of staff is under-researched in studies on feedback in higher education (Evans, 2013). Reasons put forward for this greater focus on students include institutional concerns about student dissatisfaction as expressed in student surveys (Hyland, 2013), the increased emphasis on the student experience (Tuck, 2012), the growth of the literature on formative assessment (Bailey & Garner, 2010), and the acknowledged importance of feedback as a tool for educational development (Agius & Wilkinson, 2014). While these explanations illustrate why there has been comparatively little research into the experience of staff, our knowledge and understanding of feedback would be greatly enhanced if the experiences and perceptions of those who provide the initial feedback input were to be explored in the same depth.

There are several reasons why this is necessary. First, there has been a consistent move towards a theoretical understanding of learning as situated, socially constructed and dialogic (Ion, Cano-García, & Fernández-Ferrer, 2017; Orsmond, Merry, & Handley, 2013; Tian & Lowe, 2013), which, in the case of lecturer-student feedback, places the lecturer alongside the student in the learning experience rather than in the background. Second, in alignment with such a view of learning, the concept of feedback itself is undergoing a metamorphosis. The traditional view of feedback as a form of output produced by the feedback 'provider' and transmitted to the feedback 'receiver' is giving way to the more current understanding of feedback as a social process involving teachers and students, which is not complete until an initial input is responded to, appropriated and transformed (Authors, 2016; Nicol, Thomson, & Breslin, 2014). In staff-student feedback, therefore, both lecturer and student are inextricably linked, from the perspective of educational development as well as with regard to the quality of the experience.

In addition, some of the limited research that has been conducted into staff perspectives on feedback has revealed, whether directly or indirectly, that the multitude of factors that impact on feedback processes are complex and sometimes conflicting, thereby demonstrating the need for systematic investigation focused on the experiences of staff as a specific group. Bailey and Garner (2010), for example, argue that feedback practices are constrained and shaped

both by the policies and practices of the institutions in which they occur and by the 'standards' approach represented by quality assurance agencies. Other studies have pointed to the different roles that lecturers have to undertake and how they are not always easy to reconcile. For example, Tuck (2012) identifies three roles played by the lecturer: the assessor, the worker and the teacher; while Li and De Luca (2014) report a study that found staff experienced pressure in coming to terms with their dual roles of objective assessor and learning facilitator. Another article (Evans, 2013) presented the concept of a feedback landscape that incorporated fifteen 'feedback mediators' that, it was suggested, were shared by staff and students. The list itself was developed from a review of the research literature at the time rather than an empirical study, and as a consequence is somewhat generic and could be applied to many educational activities – for example, it included, *inter alia*, gender, culture, personality, ability and cognitive style. The list nevertheless served as a useful indicator of the complexity of the issue, and partly provided the impetus for the current paper's focus on uncovering, in more specific detail, mediating factors in the feedback process, deriving them in this case from a specific empirical study.

The project which provided the data for this paper was an investigation into lecturer-student written feedback in three masters-level postgraduate programmes at one UK university. The choice of this particular type of feedback was made in consideration of the ubiquity of this form within higher education, as indicated in a number of studies (Agius & Wilkinson, 2014; Bailey & Garner, 2010). The word 'lecturer' in the study, it should be noted, was used to describe an academic staff member involved in teaching, assessing and providing feedback to university students, and was not intended to denote a particular educational approach or an individual's employment status. Although the study as a whole involved the participation of both lecturers and students, the need described above for further research into the staff perspective led to a separate process of particularised analysis of the data from staff. The research questions driving that procedure were (a) what factors mediate the written feedback provided by lecturers; and (b) what role do these mediating factors play in the process of providing written feedback? The term 'mediating factor' in this context was used to refer to any feature identified within the study data that had some kind of moderating impact on the behaviour of the lecturer participants in relation to the feedback process.

## **2. Methodology**

The three masters-level postgraduate taught programmes selected for the study were all located within the university's faculty of humanities and social sciences, although they differed with regard to disciplinary fields, which were applied linguistics, education and social policy. This range was intended to promote the robustness of the data through the variation in assessment tasks, but in the event the assessed work which provided the material for the study took a similar form across programmes, as each one involved essay-based assignments that required students to analyse texts, design a research proposal or respond in an argumentative form to written questions.

As explained above, the overall study had incorporated data from both the students and the lecturers on each of the three programmes. For the phase of the study reported in this paper, the data were derived from the lecturers only. Two lecturers from each programme (six in total) had been originally invited to participate through convenience sampling, although one eventually withdrew from the project. They were contacted first by email and then a face-to-face meeting was arranged to discuss the purpose and characteristics of the study and their participation. The participants were all permanent members of staff with expertise in the field relating to the module they were teaching. A table of the participants' profiles, outlining their qualifications, teaching experience and fields of expertise appears in *Table 1* below.

<b>Tutor</b>	<b>Qualifications</b>	<b>Teaching experience in Higher Education</b>	<b>Fields of expertise</b>	<b>Programme discipline</b>
<b>Janet</b>	BA (UK), MA (UK)	12 years	additional language education	applied linguistics
<b>Claire</b>	BA (UK), PG Cert (UK), PhD (UK)	10 years	global education, sociology of education	applied linguistics
<b>Daniel</b>	BA (Spain), PG Dip (Spain), DPhil (UK)	4 years	education policy	education
<b>Troy</b>	BA (Greece), MA (UK), PhD (UK)	16 years	sociology, social policy	social policy
<b>Alice</b>	BA (Argentina), MA (UK), PhD (UK)	15 years	political sociology	social policy

*Table 1: Participants' profiles*

The study was qualitative, drawing on two types of individual semi-structured interview. The first was a background interview conducted at the start of the academic semester in order to establish a profile of each participant's educational and professional background, and to obtain initial data on perceptions of feedback in higher education (see Appendix for details of the questions). These interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The second interview, which lasted up to one hour, took the form of a stimulated recall interview conducted at the end of the semester within two weeks after the end of the feedback cycle. Samples of written feedback which tutors had provided to students and which they had selected themselves for the interviews (formative and summative feedback forms, marginal comments on assignment outlines, and e-mail correspondence) were used as recall support. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. The study generated a database of 79,947 words across the data collection instruments and participants. This constituted a large body of data, reflecting the intent of the study, which was to obtain depth and richness of response rather than breadth. *Table 2* below lists the word count from both forms of interview for each participant.

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Background interview</b>	<b>Stimulated-recall interview</b>
Janet	7669	6106
Claire	4508	5554
Daniel	8942	12092
Troy	11518	8399
Alice	8941	6218

*Table 2: Number of transcribed words per data collection method and participant*

Each transcript was then sent to the relevant participant for comment, although in the event no participant chose to make changes. The use of multiple methods and participants, each interviewed at the beginning and the end of a period of five months, facilitated methodological and data triangulation respectively, and thus enhanced the trustworthiness of the study. The study followed the ethical guidelines published by the British Educational Research Association, for example in ensuring that participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, that written consent was obtained and that steps were taken to safeguard the identity of individual participants in all published material.

The data were analysed inductively using content analysis in a process of codification, thematic analysis and categorisation of themes. Specifically, during and following a close reading of the interview transcripts, meaningful chunks of data (that is, data which appeared to refer to some

kind of mediator) were assigned codes. Wherever possible, this involved in vivo coding. Where boundaries between codes were blurred, the codes that had been generated were then merged into larger, more manageable, units. The resulting categories were then further examined for commonalities in an increasingly abstracted process which led to the eventual identification of the three overarching categories of mediator discussed in the following section. The process was cyclical, as the analysis of background interview data informed the collection of stimulated recall interview data in a constant-comparative and data-driven approach. On completion of the data collection, a summative analysis was undertaken (Borg 2011). Data analysis was initially conducted in relation to each participant and then results were compared and subjected to further analysis across the participants. It is the results from this combined analysis of tutor data that are reported in this paper.

### 3. Findings

The findings from the cross-case analysis were grouped according to three overarching and abstract thematic categories. The first, which is described as 'experiential mediators', includes those which appeared to be drawn from beliefs, understandings and perspectives based on the previous experience of the participants as students, teachers and writers of academic texts. The key element informing the production of this category was references in the lower level categories to previous experiences within a higher education environment. The second, 'social mediators', relates to ways in which participants stated that they had adapted their feedback and discourse practices to align with those of their colleagues and peers who were part of the joint enterprise in which they were collectively engaged. The key element informing the creation of this category was the expression in the lower level categories to the placing of the participant within a social group of some kind. The third category, 'environmental mediators', refers to those factors whose existence pre-dated the individual participants' involvement in their programme or which were externally controlled and imposed. The key element informing this category was reference in the lower level categories to a systemic feature or artefact which governed feedback practices. *Table 3* below summarises the main and the salient lower level categories of mediating factors which were identified through the study.

Experiential mediators	Social mediators	Environmental mediators
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceptions of acceptability in feedback practices</li> <li>• Understandings of 'appropriate' language for written feedback</li> <li>• Sensitivity to affective impact of feedback</li> <li>• Conceptualisations of the nature of 'quality' feedback</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Desire to align format and quantity of feedback with that of colleagues</li> <li>• Desire to present self as a fellow professional</li> <li>• Desire to promote a particular 'academic' approach to students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need to address written assessment criteria</li> <li>• Constraints of time and class numbers on the quantity/depth of written feedback</li> <li>• Requirement to use feedback templates and approved modes of feedback</li> </ul>

*Table 3: Categories of mediating factors in participants' written feedback processes*

These categories, while they have been listed here separately for ease of presentation and description, were in practice overlapping and integrated, as participants' views, as they expressed them, had been shaped by all of these factors in combination. The categories and sub-categories, and how they were instantiated, are explained in more detail in the sections below. With regard to the quotations from participants that illustrate the findings, the following conventions are used: (BI) for background interviews and (SRI) for stimulated recall interviews, and all names used are pseudonyms.

### 3.1 Experiential mediators

The data yielded three particular forms of experience that had moulded participants' beliefs, perspectives and understandings of education, the university environment and their own feedback practices:

- their previous experience as students in an academic institution,
- their experience as educators within a university context, and
- their professional experience as academics engaged in academic writing practices that exposed their own work to critique.

One way in which this was made evident was in participants' comments on practices that they felt were acceptable or good practice. For example, participant Janet explained that the feedback she had been exposed to as a postgraduate student and her experience dealing with it influenced the decisions she had made when she provided written feedback to her own students. As she commented:

When I came to have to give feedback myself... I knew what was acceptable in an educational institution as a tutor on a Masters because I had been a student and received feedback (Janet, BI)

Nevertheless, it should be noted that as a student she had not been satisfied with the kind of feedback she had received. She explained that experience had given her confidence about what was acceptable, but that she had not emulated the style. She then went on to implicitly criticise the feedback she had experienced as a student as inadequate: 'I felt that... if I gave more feedback than they had then I knew I was OK... so if I was giving that much feedback, then I must be a good tutor, so I've always given more feedback than I received, always' (BI). Her critical reflection on her student experience thus appeared to have led to an association in her mind of quality with quantity.

Participants' previous experience also affected the choices they made about their use of language in their feedback comments. For example, another tutor, Troy, also referred back to his previous experiences of learning when he explained the rationale behind his choice of what he felt was acceptable language in feedback comments:

I use a kind of language that I try to distance the person from what they've done, so I don't say 'you' ... I always try to say 'well, let's talk about the work' ... so the focus is not on them and their qualities but rather this piece of work and what does it demonstrate ... it's one of these things that I remember when I was a student, when you receive an essay back and you are anxious about your work, and the last thing you want is to have somebody saying 'you are', 'you have'. (Troy, SRI, italics indicate oral emphasis)

De-personalising the language in feedback thus served a two-fold purpose: to clarify what the focus of feedback was and to preserve students' sense of self-worth. Troy's empathy with the student experience, instantiated through his careful selection of the discourse he selected to communicate with his students, was further illustrated in his comment 'I try ... not to give them phrases that are obscure or so generic that they don't understand what they mean ... *I remember as a student myself* I used to get "oh, this is not very critical" and, to me, that's not enough, you have to say what does it mean' (SRI, italics added).

At the same time, Troy sometimes found himself choosing the 'vague and unhelpful' words his own tutors had used in spite of the affinity with students' reactions he felt when remembering

his student experience: 'it's really funny because when I write this kind of stuff and my students come and ask me 'what do you mean by that?', sometimes you find it hard to describe' (BI). Such a contrast between this participant's stated practices and the views that he articulated about the kind of feedback he valued again indicates that feedback practices are not straightforward, and, moreover, that staff may be aware of the contradictions inherent in their own behaviour.

Some tutors reported how their academic teaching experiences in higher education, rather than their experiences as students, had affected the language of their written feedback. Claire, for instance, explained how her professional experience informed the tone, content and structure of the written feedback she provided to particular groups of students:

... I've been in academia for ten years ... and I've found that you can support students, particularly those that find some of this quite difficult and this particular group do, by being as positive as you can, so starting at really trying to talk about the progress they've made to date and make them feel as if they are moving forward, because this unit can be very daunting, and also finish off by saying 'this is just some thoughts for you but you can do with it whatever you want to do with it' (Claire, SRI)

Daniel, too, expressed the view that one aspect of his written feedback which may have improved through teaching experience was clarity, 'in the sense of focusing on the most important issues more than other aspects, perhaps being less comprehensive to gain more clarity' (Daniel, SRI). He also drew on his past teaching experience when providing summative assessments of students' work, referring to having 'something in the back of your mind which is the assessment criteria, the standard that you have seen for the unit before, judgments that you have made in the past' (SRI).

The third way in which previous experience impacted on the way participants provided feedback related to their own exposure to criticism as part of their professional work. For example, Claire drew an association between the kind of feedback that might have a negative affective impact on students and her own experience of having her academic work published:

You always have to put a careful balance on [feedback] and it's very, very easy to go for the jugular and expose ... some people maybe it suits them better just to be told where they're not meeting the unit criteria but that can't do anything for anyone's self-esteem. *We've all had reviews of articles ...* (Claire, SRI, italics added)

Thus it can be seen that participants drew on their experience in higher education as former students, teachers and researchers when considering the process of feedback and that this experience affected their conceptions of that which constituted 'good' or 'acceptable' feedback practices, their approach to the writing of feedback, and their sense of how students might respond to the feedback they provided.

### **3.2 Social mediators**

This category of data refers to comments which related to the tutors' awareness that they were part of a collective or group, and which indicated that participants were moderating the content and language of their feedback in consideration of their colleagues and other staff who might gain access to their written feedback. For example, some tutors emphasised the need for conformity, for alignment with peers within the same academic environment. When second marking, Janet, for instance, checked the similarity of feedback provided by tutors in the same programme:

I see what [names of colleagues] do and we see each other's [feedback] and I think '[name of colleague] started to use bullet points; I don't but I've looked at it and I've thought 'we're doing exactly the same thing, it's just that [name of colleague] is doing it with bullets and I'm doing it with sentences' ... So I've definitely checked that we're all in line and we are. (Janet, BI)

In the interview conducted a few months later, Janet stated that she had incorporated her colleague's practice of using bullet points into her own feedback 'because that's much more efficient than prose' (SRI). She was also very concerned to ensure that 'students are getting a consistent message that we're all singing from the same song sheet and that we give feedback in the same way ... that's useful for them' (BI). Daniel, too, pointed out the need to take into account other stakeholders: 'the audience is not only the student but also the moderator for the unit and the external examiners' (SRI). Likewise, Janet argued that the amount of feedback she provided, especially that on drafts, was influenced by the colleagues who she thought might read her feedback: 'we're all trying to conform to what the department expects us to do or what the external assessor expects us to do and what a Masters student feedback should look like' (SRI).

More broadly, Troy was concerned with the type of intellectual demands required of people who engage in university life, since he perceived universities as 'civic spaces where free thinking takes place, where people think critically, are self-reflective, and can ask new questions, not just respond to pre-set questions' (BI). In accordance with this view, he was keen to encourage students to emulate academic approaches, and he produced written feedback that included questions and comments which challenged students' analyses, interpretations and conclusions (e.g. 'this is an unqualified statement and should not be stated without criticism', SRI) and invited them to reflect and develop criticality:

What I ask students to do is try to get the sense that the person is reflective enough and has enough capacity to go beyond what they've read and to create something that is a little bit more innovative ... it takes up a notch in terms of its understanding of the topic (Troy, BI)

Participants also reflected on their own role and expertise within the academic enterprise. Troy, in discussing how, when he assessed work, he was unsure of whether he was persuaded by style over substance, commented 'very often I tend to reflect upon this... I wonder [is it] lack of style or is it really the content? I mustn't say that, because I'm a professional, I shouldn't have these doubts' (BI). This observation, which associated professionalism with certainty, could be interpreted as contrasting with his desire for his students to express a critical viewpoint that challenged received understandings, but might also be seen as reflecting a particular imagining of his role as tutor as being a locus of authority. Such a position seemed also to be expressed by Janet, who, when stating how she used the language of the marking criteria, revealed a need to convey a sense of authority: 'I'm not sure how much the students understand some of that, things like 'marshalled' and 'weighed'... but sometimes it makes it sound authoritative if you use some of that language' (BI). These comments provide further examples of the multiple, and sometimes conflicting, factors at work in the process of feedback provision, but they also reveal participants' awareness of their place in a social activity that was accessed and evaluated by a range of individuals other than students to whom the feedback was putatively addressed.

All the participants commented on aspects of discourse, whether it was their own or that of their students. In this, they seemed to desire that their students should emulate the kind of



language they and their peers produced. Janet, for example, clearly separated knowledge and the expression of it in relation to her feedback practices, as she observed:

There's two kinds of feedback that our students need. They need feedback on their language and the way they've organised their essay... and there's the content, their understanding of issues. (Janet, BI)

Claire, who taught in the same course, concurred ('[use and understanding of English] is probably where they're being held back', SRI), which motivated her to modify her writing style to make her feedback more accessible to students. She stated that she tried to use short, clear sentences 'so I'm purposely clearer in how I give feedback to all my students, especially to those students who are overseas and working with English as their second language' (SRI).

Another illustration of a social mediator is the way in which participants described their own use of language, which modelled the kind of critical engagement with a text that they sought from their students, and indicated some nuanced views on the discursive nature of feedback and shared understandings of the subtle distinctions within the overarching genre of written feedback. A distinction was observed between the nature of the discourse in comments made in the margins of assignments, where participants engaged in an argument with the text, and those made elsewhere. For example, Janet commented:

When I write the comments on the draft, on the text, they may not be as polite, so I might say things like 'why have you done this?', which is a very direct question, and 'can you explain this?' In the summarizing comments then it's 'you would have benefitted from doing this' ... it's just different discourse ... I think it's more direct when it's actually next to what they've done... whereas these comments [in the template provided] have to be slightly more general. (Janet, SRI)

Troy also stated that comments in assignment margins enabled the tutor to 'have a dialogue with the text' (SRI). He used a symbols-based system to do this: 'I always tick where I think there is a good point, I always put a question mark where there is something that is really not very clear, an exclamation mark where there is something quite unique and where may be a point that surprised me in a good sense' (BI). Alice, too, claimed that her feedback on students' work was 'more informal ... like a conversation with the material ... I connect with things, for example thinking "why are you saying this?"' (BI).

In short, in their comments the participants revealed a concern to ensure that their feedback practices were aligned with those of their colleagues, that they ensured they presented a 'professional' image to students and to other staff, and that in their feedback they assisted students by modelling what it meant to be an academic in terms of intellectual critique and the expression of ideas.

### **3.3 Environmental mediators**

The findings in this section relate to the broader academic environment within which the participants were operating. A number of factors were described by participants as contributing to their feedback behaviour but over which they had no direct control as individuals. These included pre-established assessment criteria, written feedback templates, class sizes and workload allocations. Some of these externally-imposed elements seemed generally to align with their preferred courses of action or were welcomed as an external source of authority, and were often linked by participants to their own experience. In relation to this, one of these factors which all participants said had influenced their written feedback was the institutional feedback assessment policies. Tutors highlighted the impact of the

assessment criteria on the content of their feedback and the way they expressed themselves. For example, Janet was keen to relate her comments to the assessment criteria: 'I'm not just writing what I think, I'm writing what I think and I'm showing you that it matches what those criteria that are in your handbook have' (BI). Daniel also emphasised the role of assessment criteria in orienting tutors to the focus of their assessment and thus in creating consistency among markers:

[the assessment criteria] give some indication ... remind you of the elements you should take into consideration ... 'keep an eye on the structure, also check the sources, also do this other thing' and, in that respect, they are useful. (Daniel, BI)

In addition to the assessment criteria, tutors claimed that the content of their feedback was influenced by another institutional feedback assessment document, the feedback templates which their respective departments required them to use. Janet's and Daniel's template, for example, was divided into 'Strengths in relation to the MA Assessment Elements', 'Areas for improvement in relation to the MA Assessment Elements', and 'Other comments'. Janet saw the benefit of organising feedback in these three areas: 'I think it's a summarising reinforcement of the message ... it basically gives them a clear indication of what they've done right and what they've done wrong as a summary, and what they need to do' (BI). Daniel concurred, and highlighted the value of the feedback template in reminding tutors to comment on both strengths and improvement areas.

While some externally-imposed constraints were seen as enhancing their practices, staff identified others which, they asserted, had a negative impact on practice. The first was large classes. Janet, for example, perceived her class of 45 students as large and felt that this had a negative effect on how she responded to individual inquiries after she had sent out formative feedback on drafts:

Sometimes after the draft, somebody might send an e-mail or want to have a tutorial. It's less likely that it's going to be physically possible with this many students ... I don't want to go through every step, everything with them because I haven't got the time. (Janet, BI)

Alice, on the other hand, had seven students in her class, which she thought enabled her to interact with the students more effectively when it came to feedback: 'there were fewer essays so I could have more time [to mark] ... I knew all of them, and I knew what they were writing about and I knew what they like' (SRI).

Class size was closely related to another environmental factor which featured strongly in the data: time restrictions. All tutors referred to the unrealistic allocation of time in their workloads to assess student work. Janet argued she did not have time to respond to individual inquiries: 'it takes me much longer to mark an assignment than the university could afford to pay' (SRI). She added that, if 'there was more time', she would 'talk through the feedback with the students rather than just send it to them, and check they understand it' (SRI). Similarly, Claire said she faced difficulties trying to respond to students' inquiries via e-mail: 'they just need to be reassured quite regularly that they're on the right track, so it's quite time-consuming because you get a lot of emails like this' (SRI).

Daniel added that the time allocated to marking was particularly unworkable in the case of units with large classes as it did not 'take into consideration how many students you have in the unit' (SRI). He also argued that there was '[lack of] consistency between programmes of the same nature within the university' since the lecturers on some of them 'do not provide feedback on [drafts]' (SRI). This, he believed, was problematic as it created inequity in working

conditions, placing more pressure on tutors teaching larger groups, as well as inconsistency in the type and quality of the feedback provided. Troy indicated that if he were allocated more time, he would provide more specific comments: '[I'd] give them precise instructions ... very specific examples or something more specific ... but the problem is always resources ... I could do that if I spent an hour on every script, which I can't, it's physically impossible' (SRI).

#### **4. Discussion**

At a broad level, the findings from this study indicated that, for this group of participants, there was a commonality in their perspectives on feedback, and that the factors that mediated their feedback practices were consistent across individuals. It was evident that an important factor was their previous experiences of being postgraduates, teachers and producers of academic work to be critiqued, and that this assisted them in empathising with their students and producing feedback that they believed students would find helpful. In particular, they were conscious of and responsive to the affective power of feedback, and moderated their language accordingly. Their perceived roles as constructive critics, as shaped through their own experience, thus played an important part in the decisions they made.

The importance of affect in the feedback process, as identified by the participants, has been noted in a number of previous studies on feedback, particularly where the impact on students has been investigated (Authors, 2016; Molloy, Borrell-Carrió, & Epstein, 2013; Yang & Carless, 2013). Those studies report that positive feedback can increase student motivation and enhance interpersonal relationships. The current study adds to that research by demonstrating that, in this case, staff were sensitive to the impact of their words and chose their language in ways that they believed were appropriate to the context of the feedback situation.

Simultaneously, through their feedback participants promoted to their students a way of working that was consistent with their perceptions of what it was to be academic. This is illustrated through their emphasis when giving feedback on the importance of critical analysis, and their demonstration of how to do this by engaging in an 'argument' with their students' texts. At the point of undertaking the process of reading their students' work they were much more concerned about the robustness and quality of the argumentation, and it was their role as expert commentators that dominated their feedback discourse at these points rather than concern for affective impact. This is reflected in their stated use of language devoid of politeness markers or hedging devices when they made comments in the margins of assignments, which contrasted with the more indirect language used in comment boxes on the feedback form template. The types of feedback behaviour in which lecturers engaged might therefore have appeared at times to be contradictory because of their specific aims at any given moment; in this case they could not simultaneously perform or model critical engagement with a text and prioritise affective impact.

The students, however, were not the only audience for the participants' written comments, as they also had to take into consideration their colleagues, including unit moderators and others who had the power to evaluate their comments. In doing this it appeared they perceived a need to demonstrate that they were professional practitioners within the higher education enterprise. For example, at least one participant felt it necessary with her feedback to display her status as an authority by appropriating the language of the assessment criteria, even though she suspected that students would not understand it. In establishing credibility with one audience, she thereby reduced the likelihood that her feedback would be effective for another.

There was therefore a tension inherent in participants' feedback practices derived from the sometimes contradictory mediators that were in play. Tutors had both to communicate

meaningfully with their students and, in effect, communicate to their peers that they were collegial and professional in their feedback practices. Bailey and Garner (2010) have also identified the linguistic challenges this presents, pointing to a 'wide discrepancy between the meanings the two parties attribute to the language used... a sense of estrangement from the language of feedback affecting both students and teachers' (2010, p. 193). In addition to these two goals, participants also expressed a need to convey to students a sense that their teachers were aligned in their understandings of what was appropriate, that there was a certain consistency of approach. Conformity of expectations among staff has been identified as an issue in some previous studies, particularly in cases where students become confused or disoriented by differences between staff (Brown, 2007; Orsmond, Maw, Park, Gomez, & Crook, 2013). In this study it was evident that staff sought to minimise this kind of impact.

In addition, participants were subjected to the constraints of the environment in which they were operating, although some of these constraints, for example those artefacts designed to standardise practice, such as feedback templates and marking criteria, were seen as valuable when it came to preparing appropriate written feedback. In contrast, the external imposition of large classes and the limitations on time were reported as producing the greatest pressure on participants, reportedly having the most negative effect on their feedback practices. The issue of large classes has been widely reported in previous studies from either the staff and student perspective (e.g. Hounsell, McCune, Hounsell, & Litjens, 2008) as has the issue of time limitations (e.g. Jonsson, 2012; Li & De Luca, 2014). One solution that has been put forward is the introduction of audio, rather than written, feedback (Lunt & Curran, 2010), but to take effect this would need to be an accepted and approved practice in circumstances where time allocations for feedback may be written into institutional guidelines (Nixon, Brooman, Murphy, & Fearon, 2017). Thus the individual has limited capacity to enact change with regard to this category of constraint.

What this study has highlighted is that participants had been placed in what Bailey and Garner (2010, p. 196) refer to as an 'invidious position', even though their commitment to student learning was clearly evident. As they provided their written feedback the participants in this study were not simply engaging in a 'dialogue' in the sense of one individual communicating with another, but were having to conform to systemic constraints while trying to address multiple audiences with differing messages through a single text.

Time and again, research in this area emphasises that the primary function of staff feedback is to promote student learning (e.g. Crimmins, *et al.*, 2016; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Jonsson, 2012; Li & De Luca, 2014; Pokorny & Pickford, 2010). In association with this function much of the literature on this has included recommendations on how academics might amend their practices in order to achieve this (e.g. Nixon, *et al.*, 2017; Rae & Cochrane, 2008; Robinson, Pope, & Holyoak, 2011; Williams & Smith, 2017a). There is, however, also a growing acknowledgement in the more recent literature in this area that there is more than one group of stakeholders in the feedback process whose needs should be taken into account. For example, Carless (2015, n.p.) has pointed out that 'feedback processes should be satisfying for teachers as well as useful for students', and Williams and Smith (2017b, p. 133) argue that 'if learning is truly a shared and dialogic process, then 'enhancement' does not have to equate only with 'student enhancement' – it can and should involve enhancement of the teaching and learning experience for us, as their lecturers, too'.

## **5. Concluding comments**

This was a small-scale case study conducted within one teaching faculty at a single institution, and so it cannot claim generalisability. In addition, its focus was limited to staff-student written feedback in a postgraduate context and did not take into account the many other forms and

modes of feedback in higher education that have usefully been investigated and reported in the research literature (e.g. peer feedback, self-feedback, multimodal feedback, feedback using innovative technologies) which illustrate that teacher written feedback, while indubitably ubiquitous, need not monopolise institutional agendas.

Nevertheless, this paper has contributed to our understanding of feedback in a number of ways. First, it sheds more light on a comparatively under-researched area of an otherwise extensively researched field by focusing on the perceptions of staff as they reflected on the feedback material that they had produced in actual feedback situations. Second, the findings revealed that while staff were clearly concerned with student learning at the level of the individual piece of work, they were also cognisant of the 'bigger picture' of their roles within higher education. In other words, the decisions made by participants about the form and content of the feedback they provided related not only to the teacher-student dyad but involved considerations that went beyond the immediate learning needs of individual students, additionally encompassing their views of higher education as a construct and what it meant to be 'academic'.

Third, and most importantly, the study demonstrated that, for this group of participants, staff feedback practices could not be envisaged in a 'stand-alone' way as part of an individual's teaching repertoire, but were rooted in and mediated through a complex system of constraints, affordances and influences within a wide social, educational and cultural context. This included not only the educational practices of the past, which had helped mould the participants' views on how they should behave, but current organisational structures and artefacts, and also the multiple other individuals, such as peers, supervisors, and all those who contribute to establishing the institutional norms by which staff-student feedback practices are constrained or enabled and by which 'feedback' itself is conceptualised.

Further research focusing on the provision of staff feedback within its social and educational context would help identify whether the views and practices of the participants in this study are reflected in the wider academic community. If current feedback practices were to become recognised, through more extensive research, as a symptom or characteristic of a broader educational enterprise, it might help explain why current perceptions of feedback, as expressed through student surveys, institutional policies and quality assurance bodies, continue to be fraught with difficulty. Further studies taking such a perspective might identify not only what could improve students' learning and their experience, but also what is broadly feasible within an undertaking that appears to have several divergent or incommensurable goals.

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## **Appendix: Background interview on feedback provision**

### **1- Academic background**

- What is your degree on?
- What type of courses did you attend? (i.e. lectures, seminars, workshops, etc.)
- What was the nature of those courses in terms of:
  1. content?
  2. delivery?
  3. assessment?

### **2- Previous feedback provision experience as a student**

- Nature of the feedback received:
  1. formative? summative? corrective?
  2. written? oral?
  3. content? (i.e. type of information provided)
  4. language used?
  5. structure?
  6. medium/delivery: paper-form? electronic? audio?
  7. when? (e.g. timely, how long after completing assignments)
  8. provider: who provided feedback? (e.g. tutor, peers, blind markers, director of studies)
- How useful did you find that feedback for your student enhancement/ career development?
- How comprehensible was it?
- What did you do with that feedback?

### **3- Current feedback provision practice**

- Nature of the feedback you provide:
  1. formative? summative? corrective?
  2. written? oral?
  3. content? (i.e. type of information provided)
  4. language used?
  5. structure?
  6. medium/delivery: paper-form? electronic? audio?
  7. when? (e.g. timely, how long after completing assignments)
  8. provider: who provides feedback? (e.g. tutor, peers, blind markers, director of studies)
- To what extent is your feedback provision influenced by contextual factors?
  1. students
  2. peers
  3. senior colleagues
  4. department / faculty / university
  5. community

### **4- Current beliefs / knowledge about feedback provision**

- What purpose do you think feedback serves?

- In what ways do you think it can support student learning experience / professional development?
- Can you describe 'good feedback practice'?
  1. formative? summative? corrective?
  2. written? oral?
  3. content? (i.e. type of information provided)
  4. language used?
  5. structure?
  6. medium/delivery: paper-form? electronic? audio?
  7. when? (e.g. timely, how long after completing assignments)
  8. provider: who provided feedback? (e.g. tutor, peers, blind markers, director of studies)
- What do you think students do with the feedback they receive?